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A BRIDE'S "IMPROVEMENTS"

By JEANNETTE MARKS

MRS. JENKINS looked over at Mr. Jenkins, merchant and bard, and there was love and wonderment in her eyes. He was reclining in an armchair, his long legs stretched before him, his head at rest against the chair, his hands folded over his stomach, his eyes tight closed, his mouth wide open, his lips moving, and every once in a while his tongue quickly lapping his upper lip. Janny looked away and out of the windows to the meadows that rolled up into the mist like big gray waves; this was the act of composition, she knew, and too sacred even for her, his humbler half, to behold. But the misty uplands suggested over-much of that unnamable something which when she looked at her husband made her wish to shut her eyes, for might she not, Janny reasoned, see more than she ought to see of the divine spirit that moved behind those hills and behind the lips of Ariel Jenkins. So her thoughts slipped back into the living-room of Ty Mawr while her eyes avoided the inspired contents of the armchair. She had been a bride and the envied mistress of Ty Mawr just two weeks; however, she was thirty and matrimony was late for her, and Ariel Jenkins being forty-five it was none too early for him. Janny felt her responsibilities keenly. Was she living up to them? She was at the mercantile centre of the village, her better half was not only a merchant, but also a crowned poet, her house the most important in Glaslyn. And Glaslyn expected changes; Mrs. Parry Wynn, *the baker*, said so, Mrs. Gomer Roberts, *the tinman*, had prophesied, and Mrs. Jeezer Morris, *the minister*, had whispered to Betto Griffiths, who had told Janny of these expectations, that she supposed—nay, she *hoped*—Ariel Jenkins's home with a woman in it would soon look like a God-fearing place and receive some improvements. Janny's glance roved through the sitting-room. She had made a few alterations, but somehow in the half light of dusk they seemed as nothing. What was the moving or replenishing of a taper-holder, a fresh case for Ariel's harp, a new cover for the table, or the addition of a few pleasant-faced China cats to a regimental mantelpiece,—indeed, she sadly asked herself what were these changes in comparison with the unappointed something she was expected to accomplish as Mrs. Ariel Jenkins, *the shop?* She was a stranger in Glaslyn, an intruder from a great outside world, and now she felt bewildered, lonely. Her eyes flitted to Ariel's face for comfort.

"Dearie!"

There was no answer.

"Is it comin', Ariel dear?"

"Aye," he snapped.

Janny winced; she had never lived with genius, and somehow she thought it would be different. Her deep-blue eyes had a still look in them that suggested not only a long habit of self-repression, but also perplexity, and sadness, too; there was appeal in every feature of her face—an appeal made the more pathetic, perhaps, by the childlike lines of pale-gold curling hair about her forehead and tired eyes, and the delicate hollows beneath her cheek bones and the fragile sweetness of her mouth. It was a face in its soft bloom and delicacy forever young and yet unforgettably weary. She straightened out her kirtle and again her glance roved the room. There must be a clean hearth brush, new muslin curtains for the casement; the stairway landing, where it turned by the front windows, looked even in the twilight shabby with the wear and tear of heavily booted feet and clogs, the light from the oriel window above the landing shining through with bald ugliness upon the stairs. As she looked at the light Janny's eyes dilated, her face flushed, and she leaned forward, gazing intently at the window. For the minute she had forgotten Ariel, but he, puff, puff, puff, with many sighs and yawns, and much stretching of his long legs, was coming out of his inspired coma. His awakening look fell upon Janny there where she sat, her hands clasped in her lap, her shoulders tipped forward, her chin tilted upward, a circle of quiet light about her hair, her eyes intent upon the stairway window.

"Janny dear, what is it? What are ye lookin' at?"

"Oh! na—aye, lad, I——."

"Well, well, Janny!"

"Ariel, I was thinkin'."

"Aye, an' ye were plannin', too."

He was thoroughly aroused now from his inspiration, and studying that object, woman, which through some twenty-five years he had sung and praised. Ariel's eyes searched her; stanza, metre, rhyme, theme, were all forgotten, for he saw that Janny possessed a thought she had no intention of parting with to him. He glanced from her to the window upon which she had been looking so rapturously when he surprised her gaze. So far as he could see it was like any other stairway light in Glaslyn, except that it was oval instead of rectangular, and perhaps a little deeper than some, but otherwise precisely like scores he had seen. Then he called imagination to his aid—that imagination which had been the means of begetting shillings over the counters of his shop, which had won for him a comfortable income, commercial success, as well as made him the foremost bard in his country. He peered through the window; what he beheld was a bit of dusky sky with a shadowy star seemingly behind it. He dismissed imagination and returned to the study of his bride. It was a whim probably; perhaps one of those unshaped thoughts, elemental, unspoken, to which women listen in their idle moments; indeed, it might even be some dreaming about him of which Janny in the shyness of their relation, still new, was too sensitive to speak. Gradually Ariel forgot the problem in his consciousness of the charm of Janny with her deep-blue eyes, her child-like pale-gold hair, the delicate lines of her fragile face, so different from the Welsh women of their village. Under his scrutiny Janny sat serenely with a more than wonted air of self-possession. She interrupted him.

"Ariel, ye've been to sea, dear?"

"Aye, when I was a lad."

"Was it for long?"

"Not long, two years sailin' with cargoes between our coast and Ireland."

"Did ye learn much of the ways of sailor folk?"

"Aye, much."

"Runnin' up an' down the ropes?"

"Aye, that, an' more too."

"Did ye learn tatoom', dear?"

"Ay; the marks ye've seen on my arms an old salt taught me to do. The sailors were clever with the needle, sketchin' as well as sewin'."

"Do ye think ye could sketch a star now, Ariel, or have ye forgotten"

Ariel laughed, partly with pleasure at this talk by the fire, partly from joy in the companionship.

"Aye, I'm thinkin' I could, little lamb."

He drew his chair closer to hers and saw her face brighten; it rested her so to have him near her, and her thoughts sped back through all the years of loneliness and hunger for the things she could not have; she had a new consciousness of life and of being useful; it was not merely Ariel, it was the house, too, and what she could do to make it—well, the word escaped her; anyway it was the house as well as Ariel, and it was lovely to think of what she could do for it while he made poetry and sold things in the shop.

how lonely Janny must have been ever since she came to him; the appeal of her confidence touched the best that was in him, the protection that was his to give her, and some potential sense of fatherhood. Aye, he knew how tired she was after the life that lay behind her, and he gathered her into his arms, holding her there quietly while he talked.

"What shall it be, Janny? A star, an anchor, a bit of rope, an' a cat, did ye say, dear?"

"Aye, a star, Ariel, please. I don't think I want the anchor. The bit rope would be nice, dear. An' I'd like the cat."

"An' what are ye goin' to do with these drawin's, Janny? Are ye goin' to hang them on the walls.

"No, I'm no goin' to do that."

"Well, it's just as well, dearie, for Betto Griffiths an' Mrs. Gomer Roberts, *the tinman*, an' Mrs. Parry Wynn, *the baker*, would be hauntin' Ty Mawr. But what *are* ye goin' to do with them, dearie?"

"Ariel, I couldn't say *now*"— Janny stirred uneasily,—"I might be hangin' them in our bedroom an' —an'—an' I might be puttin'—puttin' them in the—Bible to press. They'd be useful."

"Aye, that's so. An' how large shall I draw them?"

Janny thought a minute.

"The cat, dear, I'd like about a foot long—that is, from his tail to his whiskers,—no, I'm thinkin' that's too narrow for the cat; from the tail to the whiskers I'd like him one foot an' a half, Ariel."

Janny's glance took a flight over Ariel's shoulder.

"An' th star?"

Janny thought again.

"Six inches from point to point, an' four stars—na—one star will do—I can cut—oh!—Ariel, *one*

SO JANNY WATCHED ARIEL'S THIN FINGERS WORK SKILFULLY, SWIFTLY, WITH THE PENCIL.

"An', Ariel, could ye sketch me an anchor an' a bit of rope?"

"Aye, dearie, I could; ye know I could anyway, for I had drawin' at the school in Carnarvon while I was an apprentice there."

"Drawin'?"

"It was mam's idea."

Janny eyes grew large.

"Ariel, do ye—do ye—think ye could draw me a —a cat?"

Ariel took one look at Janny and burst into laughter; shop, poetry, everything was forgotten in his amusement at her child-like eagerness. Suddenly he stopped, for Janny's face was quivering. Aye, he had forgotten, too, that this was no peasant woman; his laughter seemed brutal.

"Janny, little lamb," he said, softly, drawing her head to him, "I could, dear; I'll sketch all the cats ye want."

Janny sighed comfortably, her head still upon his shoulder, the weariness easing away from her heart. She could do it now, it would make the greatest difference; Betto Griffiths and others should see that she was something more than a bit of porcelain in Ariel's home, that she could do something more than merely oversee house cleaning. Besides, it really was something more,—it was having an idea of her own, and that until Ariel rescued her she had never been allowed to have. She reached up and patted his face; even her gestures were incomprehensibly childlike. What she lacked in the passion of a woman she seemed to make up in the perfect trust of a child. Ariel, selfish with the selfishness of a man who has lived by himself and who has lived much in his own mind, thought now with a pang

star, please."

"An' the rope?"

"It's the twisted kind I want, an' it must go all around the—oh, dear! Ariel, about an inch wide, please."

"Good. One cat, one star, one inch rope. Anything more, little lamb?"

"No-o-; could ye do it now?"

"Aye, dearie; fetch me the ruler, the paper, an' a pencil."

So Janny watched Ariel's thin fingers work skilfully, swiftly, with the pencil, the ruler measuring off star-points and a cat's length as carefully as if the paper were Welsh flannel worth one and six a yard. And the next night, after a day of unusual elation of feeling, Janny, when sleep had come to Ariel, stole noiselessly from the marital side, crept to the white-washed wall of their bedroom, pallid in moonshine, felt for the white paper cat and star and length of rope hanging there indiscernible, caught the edge of the paper with her fingers as she felt about, unpinned the pieces, and tiptoed out of the room down the stairway.

As she moved about the sitting room in her night-gown she looked pathetically little, the flush in her cheeks marking her eager helplessness. Much had slipped by her, and she had lost much in that sorry life before Ariel took her and brought her to live among strangers, whose motives and feelings she had no means of penetrating. But the tenderness, the innocence, the expectancy of childhood, had remained with her as if making amends for her loss or awaiting the sunshine of maturing impulses. She set a candle beside the settle, lifted the cover, took out two long rolls of paper, closed the settle, and bore her parcels to the table. Then she united them with trembling fingers, rolling out several feet of green and crimson paper and a small sheet of yellow. She placed weights on the corners of the lengths, pausing to run her fingers into her hair as she gazed with rapt eyes upon the colored surfaces, commonplace enough to all appearances. She took the cat, laid it carefully on the crimson, pinned it down, and penciled around the edges. In the same fashion she drew the outlines of four yellow stars and some lengths of yellow rope. Finally with a pair of shears she cut out all the outlined figures. She lifted the cat, freed now from the matrix of surrounding paper and enlivened with the lifelikeness of a new liberty, and held its foot and a half of length against the candle light. The light shone through the crimson paper but dimly. Janny nodded, took a small cake of paraffine, melted it, and with a bit of cloth sponged the cat as it lay upon the table. This she did also to the four yellow stars, to the lengths of rope, and to a large piece of green paper upon which the original cat pattern had been appliqued. Once more she lifted the crimson animal to the light,—the candle flame shone through clearly with a beautiful crimson hood of softer light. After this Janny broke a half dozen eggs, separating the white from the yolk. Her fingers worked feverishly now and her eyes kept measuring distances; in her nervous haste there were moments when she seemed hardly able to accomplish the next step forward in the task already complete in her mind's eye. She stopped to listen for sounds and steps as she worked, and again and again she imagined Ariel was looking down from the head of the staircase. But she finished the work uninterrupted, and with a sigh, half sob of weariness, half contentment, and with many a glance of admiration as she went, she tiptoed up the stairway. Ariel was sleeping, and as she crept into bed she put out a hand to touch his thick black hair, and then, curling into the cool white of the pillow, fell asleep as children sleep, one hand resting lightly on his arm.

Ariel Jenkins awoke at the waking time of all Glaslyn—the dawn; Janny lay beside him, still sleeping, her face heavily shadowed in her abundant hair. She seemed so wistfully childlike and her closed eyes so unforgettably weary. Perhaps it was merely the shadows of the early dawn and her hair, but the eyelids had a kind of veined transparency and her face a transparent pallor, and the mouth drooped. Ariel's selfishness smote him consciously; he thought with a pang of Janny, and he made resolutions. With this awakening he transferred a little of his poetry from the bard to the man. Aye, he acknowledged to himself, this might well be called the education of Ariel Jenkins, bard and merchant. And for the first time a thought that gripped his heart brought him no desire to turn it into rhyme. He recalled compassionately all her efforts to make improvements in the house, her evident inability to understand and cope with the shrewd Welsh women of their village, and he remembered with fear the prying curiosity and overt enmity these women had shown towards Janny. Then he wondered in a desultory way what she was planning to do with the stars and the cat and the bits of rope. And after she awakened and they were talking at breakfast he reflected how easily his resolution won success, for Janny since he brought her to Glaslyn had not been as buoyant, almost animated, as she was this morning. Ariel thought, too, that he had not noticed before the way Janny had of looking at him, as if she expected him to discover some extraordinary joy; maybe she was merely looking to him for happiness, but certainly there was an air of anticipation about her to-day.

Upon finishing breakfast Ariel passed with a sense of secure well-being into his shop; so many problems were solving themselves, and, on the whole, the man made him happier than the bard. Even the flag sidewalk outside the shop seemed more than ordinarily lively and merry to-day. He saw neighbors passing and heard them chatting, and once in a while there was a loud shout of laughter. Across the street, looking towards his shop, he beheld a little knot of men—Ivor Jones and Wil Penmorfa and Parry Wynn—men who did not usually have time for mirth so early in the morning. They were talking and laughing, and Ariel saw one of them point towards Ty Mawr. Just then Mrs. Gomers Roberts, *the tinman*, came in. She wanted some flannel for a blouse like the material she was wearing, and Mrs. Roberts threw back her long cloak to display the neat striped flannel. How was Mrs. Jenkins? Ariel thanked her. Janny was well.

"I'm comin' soon to have a good long visit with her," said Mrs. Roberts.

"Aye? Ye'll be welcome."

"Ye're makin' improvements, I see."

"Aye, a few," replied Ariel, using his yardstick deftly and wondering what improvements Mrs. Gomer Roberts could have had any opportunity to see.

"Glaslyn's no seen anything like it," continued Mrs. Roberts, straightening her beaver hat over the crisp white of her cap.

"No, I'm thinkin' not," answered Ariel, vaguely, rolling up the bundle of flannel with precise neatness.

He was still wondering why women talked in riddles when in came Mrs. Jeezer Morris, *the minister*. She had torn her blue kirtle and wanted a new breadth. Ariel took down the cloth. Then were showered upon him in a compacter form and one of greater authority practically the same remarks as those made by Mrs. Gomer Roberts: how was Mrs. Jenkins, she was coming to visit her, there were improvements she saw, the like of which Glaslyn had not seen before. Mrs. Morris, *the minister*, had scarcely finished her purchases when in came Mrs. Parry Wynn, *the baker;* they had evidently met that morning, and their greetings were purely conventional—a smile, a look of inquiry, a nod of negation. Mrs. Parry Wynn wanted some new cotton cloth, but apparently she also wished to make the same remarks as those made by Mrs. Gomer Roberts and Mrs. Jeezer Morris.

Then Ariel Jenkins's thoughts began the converging process, began to gather in towards some definite centre, to fix themselves upon some one thing which all these estimable women must have in mind. And when Mrs. Parry Wynn left the shop, Ariel went to the door. Betto Griffiths walked by briskly, joining the women who had just made purchases and who were gathered in a little group opposite Ty Mawr. They were looking eagerly at the house and gesticulating. Betto Griffiths laughed as she pointed to Ty Mawr and shrugged her shoulders in the direction of the shop. Ariel's heart sank. What had Janny done to make the house such an object of attraction? He stepped out to the little group of customers and looked up.

Except for the quick flexing of the muscles in his forehead and the dilation of his eyes Ariel betrayed no emotion. The oriel window jutting over the street had been transformed; he saw no longer the clear glass of the stairway light common to Ty Mawr and the other houses of Glaslyn, but a crimson cat, forefeet in air, blazoned on a green background, each quarter of the oriel brilliant with a yellow star, and the whole device bound dexterously together with a chaplet of rope.

"It *does* make a pretty light!" he exclaimed, thoughtfully; "prettier," he added, with pride, "than I had any idea it would."

The women stared at him.

"Aye, an' it's prettier within," he continued; "it sheds such a bright color on dark days."

"Is it so?" ejaculated Mrs. Parry Wynn.

"Aye, it is so," replied Ariel. "Out of Glaslyn ye see many colored windows like this in private houses —smart houses, of course."

"Just fancy!" responded Mrs. Jeezer Morris. "We've seen them in churches, the non-conformists as well as the established, but we've never heard of colored windows before in a village house, especially not with such a cat—"

"Aye, the cat!" interrupted Ariel, in a caressing voice, the far-away, much-reverenced look of the poet in his eyes. "That cat is a copy from a—medal from—the sar-coph-a-gus of Tilgath Pileser II. Aye," he added, dreamily, "the cat, the sacred symbol of Egypt, holy to the Muses, beloved of—"

"Mr. Jenkins, ye don't say so!" they all exclaimed, looking with curious glances at the oriel window.

"I will say, nodded Mrs. Gomer Roberts, "that it has an uncommonly intelligent look, whatever."

"Aye, so it has," agreed Mrs. Parry Wynn, "intelligent an'—an'—lively.

Betto Griffiths glanced about the little group shrewdly.

"An' the stars, Mr. Jenkins?" she said.

"Na, the *star!* Betto Griffiths, ye don't say ye don't know the meanin' of the five-point star, sacred to history, to sacred history, guide in the—"

"Oh, aye! interrupted Betto, "if that's the star ye mean, I certainly do."

The little gathering took a fresh look at the window; their eyes lingered reverently on the emblazoned group of cat and stars leashed together with yellow rope.

"Aye, it's a wonderful idea! asserted Mrs. Jeezer Morris, from her superior position and knowledge.

"Aye, wonderful!" solemnly affirmed the rest.

"I'm thinkin'," said Betto Griffiths, an undisciplined look still in her eyes. "Mrs. Jenkins made it?"

"Tut, Mrs. Jenkins! Oh, no! exclaimed Ariel, thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets. "*I* did it."

"Ye did!" they all exclaimed, admiringly.

"Na, Mr. Jenkins," continued Mrs. Parry Wynn, whose husband, the baker, had been standing across the street, not more than half an hour ago, laughing over the crimson cat *rampant* blazoned on the green field—"Mr. Jenkins, if Mr. Wynn thinks he could afford something like it, would ye be willin'—"

"Aye, gladly," returned Ariel; "but it's expensive, Mrs. Wynn."

"Oh!" chorused the women, in deferential voices.

"But I'm thinking'," continued Ariel, "through my connection as a merchant I might be able to obtain the material at less expense an'—"

"If ye could!" clamored the little group.

"Mr. Jenkins, if Mr. Roberts—" broke in Mrs. Roberts.

"Mr. Jenkins, if Mr. Morris—" interrupted Mrs. Morris.

"Won't ye come in?" asked Ariel, placidly interrupting them all. "I'm the certain ye will like the light even better from the inside, where it falls in such pleasin' colors on the landin'. When I was workin' on it last night by moonlight the colors were like fairyland."

"Aye, it's only a poet could have conceived this," said Mrs. Morris, with assurance, "only a poet!"

"Only a poet!" echoed the rest.

"But won't ye come in? Mrs. Jenkins will be glad to see ye."

"Aye, thank ye, 'twould be a pleasure!" and flock-like they followed Ariel into the house.

Mrs. Jenkin's eyes were red and there was the furtive aspect of a trapped animal about her, but when she saw their eager faces and heard their enthusiastic and admiring exclamations as they crowded on to the stairway landing, there was a look of surprise first and then of delight upon her face.

"Mr. Jenkins tells me ye didn't make it yourself," said Betto Griffiths, suspicion still on her sharp features.

"It came," replied Janny, glancing appealingly at Ariel—"it—came from Liverpool."

"Janny dear," corrected Ariel, with a look straight into her eyes, "ye mean the *material* did"... ... .

"Aye, Ariel," answered Jannay, with a mixture of childlike obedience and confusion; "aye, just the material."

Ariel talked a great deal; the window was admired, commented upon; there were demands for future assistance, envious exclamations of delight to Mrs. Jenkins, who was given no chance to say a word; and the little group departed.

"Well, Janny!" exclaimed Ariel.

"Ariel dear, I—I saw them—them laughin' an'—an' then—ye—" The floodgates burst and Janny threw herself sobbing into Ariel's arms.

"There, there, *dear*, little lamb!" he comforted, his own eyes wet with tears.

"I thought—thought it would—be so—pretty—an' people's been—expectin' me—to—to make changes—an'—an'—Betto Griffiths said improvements, an', Ariel—I—I—" Janny's voice caught and she sobbed afresh.

"Na, na, little lamb, dearie, don't. Janny, Janny, don't cry.

"Ariel, I saw—the—men—laughin' an'—an' slappin' their knees—an'—an' pointin' at the window—an' even—little Silvan running by—laughed, an' then when Betto Griffiths—" Jenny faltered, gulped.

"Tut, little lamb, Betto Griffiths!" exclaimed Ariel derisively. "Betto Griffiths is an ignorant woman An' dearie, didn't ye hear them all askin' me to help them to get windows like this?"

"But, Ariel, didn't ye laugh at all?"

"I laugh, Janny! Why, dear," answered Ariel, slowly, "I think—the—window—is beautiful!"

"Oh, Ariel!" said Janny, happily.

"Aye, I do, only if ye should have another idea, just tell me about it, dearie, beforehand, for it might—perhaps it wouldn't" he added, gently, "make it awkward."

"But, Ariel, I saw—

"Na, dear, that's enough—ye don't understand these people *quite* yet. The window is beautiful; aye," he continued, "I like it so we'll be sendin' it to Liverpool, to get a real stained glass window something the same—aye, dearie, I can well afford it."